Introduction
On the nature of being otherwise

> One of the pre-eminently "classical" attributes is *an indifference to originality*. Indeed, in the classical artist, originality would be a fault. He is given, he is served out, with all he is supposed to require for his task: not his to reason why, but to "get on with the job" . . . He is tied hand and foot therefore to the values of his patrons. Their morals are his morals; it is the *Weltanschauung* that perforce he holds in common with them that is his subject-matter.
>
> Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*[1]

In the fall of 1999, the Modernist Studies Association held its Inaugural Conference, aptly titled *The New Modernisms*. With this seminal event, late-twentieth-century scholarship turned back to its origins and proclaimed renewal. Echoing the progressive literature they aimed to explore, organizers and participants declared their commitment to an "international and interdisciplinary forum" and a "revitalized and rapidly changing field." Certainly, the conference lived up to its aims. As panel after panel announced, modernism was being "redefined," "reassessed," "recontextualized," "historicized," "hystericized," and, of course, "modernized." The work showcased not only new evaluations of old favorites – Woolf, Pound, and Joyce – but also first-time discussions of relatively unknown figures – Frantissek Kupka, Philippe Lamour, and Mulk Raj Anand. The field of inquiry spread from traditional centers of modernist activity – London, Paris, and New York – to the less traveled worlds of Harlem, India, and Mexico. Temporal boundaries were similarly reconstituted, widened from Wilde to Ginsberg and stretched to incorporate a few historical oddities such as Cervantes, Hopkins, and Handel. Most importantly, the period was opened to a dizzying array of postmodern paradigms and critical models, not only posthumanism, postcolonialism, and postfeminism, but also new economic criticism and geopolitical theory. Modernism, a category once bound by traditional configurations of space and time, would no longer be the same. It was poked and pulled, preened and polished for the new

century. The discussion was exciting, revolutionary, and, well, inspiring. As a review in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* explained, "scholars of modernism, who, after years of being associated with the fusty and retrograde, suddenly found themselves energized and optimistic."[2]

And yet, attending the conference, one could not escape the feeling that all this good cheer was perhaps a bit forced. Surely, any inaugural ceremony serves to define and unite its various participants. But, here, the act of renewal was accompanied by a rather anxious need for differentiation and disavowal. Now, at last, a "new," brighter modernism would lay to rest the specter of fascism. For once and for all, modernist scholars would slough off the reactionary politics of their field. Thus, the revived authors and spaces mentioned above performed the double work of renewal and denial. These figures of "otherness," "alterity," and "difference" at once redeemed and obscured. This was clearly established in the seminar I attended, "Recontextualizations of Modernism, II." Here, the debate quickly turned to the issue of whether or not the term "modernism" should be expanded to include literary phenomena that occurred before the death of Edward VII and after World War II. For most participants, "modernism" was understood as a "floating signifier" or an "umbrella term," a loose set of attributes that can be applied to authors working within a variety of historical periods and geographical spaces. It was argued that we needed an open-ended, postmodern modernism, much like that which was being constructed at the conference. Its circularity aside, what was most telling about this argument was the manner in which it quickly and rigorously polarized points of view. Difference was privileged for its correctness, while any attempt to establish the historical or ideological integrity of the period, even as it might have been experienced by the moderns themselves, was met with disapproval. This latter position was criticized as elitist and reactionary, blind to the multiplicity and diversity of the ("new") modernist experience.

Needless to say, I also arrived at the inaugural conference with my own group of dissident others – T. E. Hulme, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and Jacob Epstein. I produced a new modernism of my own that focused on what seemed to be a very obscure area of aesthetic activity and debate: Wilhelm Worringer's influence on British sculptors who fought in World War I. The unspoken impulses of my own work, though, as I then began to realize them, raised new perplexing questions for me, which quickly took shape as the chapters in this book. I am certainly not the first scholar to recognize that the tragic history of the early twentieth century and its very proximity to the present continue to vex our responses to modernism. It is difficult to navigate not only the difficult political terrain of the modernist period, but

also the possible critical models that seem to derive from that period, such as deconstruction, feminism, and postcolonialism. However, I am specifically concerned with whether the oppositional impulse of recent responses can maintain any critical effectiveness. Recent modernist criticism, insofar as it emphasizes multiplicity and otherness, tends to reproduce the very object it hopes to critique. Our desire to differentiate ourselves from history, from our past, not only implies the dialectic continuity of these two moments, but also, in this particular instance, all the more clearly establishes our ideological kinship with the moderns. In other words, revolutionary modernism already asserts the political necessity of otherness and alterity, as embodied in Woolf's "outsider's society," Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement, or the John Reed clubs for the working class. But even the work of High Modernism – and in its most reactionary mode – is notable for its commitment to individualism and alterity. Eliot's celebration of "individual talent" and Pound's advocacy of the "factive personality" posit a rigid dialectic of individualism and totality, fragment and structure. Our work, insofar as it privileges related figures and themes, might only replicate and reinforce this dialectic. The need to be otherwise, to imagine our own critical otherness or to project that otherness on an otherwise forgotten modernist, augments as it obscures the ideological conditions from which that need derives.

This book, then, is partly about the way in which modernism repeats or extends itself into the future, and it explores the larger historical forces that continue to condition this activity. I start from a position similar to that of Gianni Vattimo, for whom modernity is caught or "in fact dominated by the idea that the history of thought is a progressive 'enlightenment' which develops through an ever more complete appropriation and reappropriation of its own foundations." For Vattimo, modernity is circular, reproductive, and perhaps obsessive: "For if we say that we are at a later point than modernity, and if we treat this fact as in some way decisively important, then this presupposes an acceptance of what more specifically characterizes the point of view of modernity itself, namely the idea of history with its two corollary notions of progress and overcoming."[3] This book, however, further explores the ways in which this paradox is bound to the larger forces and structures of economic modernity. The violence by which our history has been repeatedly overturned, the continual production and consumption of cultural difference, the ceaseless labor and endless discourse that shapes our own profession – these phenomena all feed as they affirm the activity of a voracious market. Indeed, even when our oppositional impulse is founded upon a desire to avoid political totality, it nonetheless replicates the economic logic upon which that fascism was based. We have yet to learn

that modernism – like the market itself – consistently fails to deliver on its most important promises, thus forcing us to perform the never-ending work of its completion. In this, as Jeffrey M. Perl argues, it assumes "the quality of a self-fulfilling prophecy, left by the modernists to be fulfilled through other selves."[4]

I want to clarify, however, that it is not modernism in general that propels itself into the future, but a specifically "romantic" modernism, with its promise of aesthetic wholeness and its emphasis on expressivity and otherness. It is a romantic modernism, I argue, that is most closely aligned with the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, whether that totality is figured as static purity or constant change. Meanwhile, "classical" modernism, with its emphasis on contingency and limit, has been wrongly dismissed by scholars. This modernism provides a potential critique and alternative to modernity as it continues to be active in our lives; it contains the origins of a more inclusive, dialectical experience that forces us to rethink the work of art as well as the subject and its political engagement. Indeed, just about every major modernist took a stand on this debate, producing critical and creative work that proclaimed either romantic or classical commitments.[5] The vigor and seriousness with which they approached this matter suggests not simply a commitment to a certain kind of aesthetic experience, but also an awareness that the very fate of the modern world was at stake. It is my contention that if we must persist in reproducing the past, particularly in our hostility to it, then it is only by reviving this specific debate that we can understand what that reproduction signifies. It is through these terms that we can begin to reestablish not only the socio-economic origins of various modern practices, but also their late-twentieth-century legacy.

From impressionism to futurism to surrealism and beyond, the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century share a rigidly oppositional logic. Paradoxically, these antagonistic programs are united in their efforts to construct authority against and through the rival claims of each other. For each, the attempt to establish a certain authenticity, a new perspective, a transcendent consciousness, depends upon the presence of some fallen other, some decadent or marked double. Indeed, as argued by critics from Walter Benjamin to Rita Felski, it is this oppositional logic that informs the avant-garde's tendency toward domination and violence.[6] The most casual look at futurist or vorticist activity exposes avant-gardism as a largely imperial attitude, one informed by discourses of cultural, if not racial, superiority and evolutionary progress. Similarly, these movements, along with German expressionism or French cubism, express a masculine

agressiveness, an often hostile and repressive attitude toward various cultural markers of the feminine. Ultimately, it is also this oppositional logic and its manifestations that link the avant-garde with totalitarian politics. Avant-gardism and the fascist movements of the early twentieth century are united by their celebration of violent renewal and progress, by their faith in an aesthetic transcendence of the fallen world. They revel in a shared opposition to bourgeois culture and its materialism, and in a shared yearning for redemption and pure, original selfhood.

But, despite this undeniably repulsive violence, the avant-garde continues to confound our understanding of the modern period. As many critics have observed, the avant-garde's often radical commitment to progress and innovation calls into question its often reactionary polemics. Its iconoclastic and dissonant art complicates its support of totalitarian structures and regimes.[7] What needs to be clarified is that these movements, both aesthetic and political, tend to eschew the conventional terms of tyranny – order, control, stasis – for a dialectic of change and stability, revolt and regulation. They find in constant war or upheaval a certain perverse stasis or stability. Indeed, even many High Modernist works support a ceaseless activity of interpretation or production of meaning. Even in what appears to be their systematic denial of closure, they conjure – albeit negatively – the possibility of a rational wholeness or transcendence. Ultimately, then, what appears to define the aesthetic politics of the period, despite the specifics of political affiliation, is a romantic metaphysic that can achieve authority only by way of dissent, the center by way of margins, the self in and through the other. As the romantic artist evokes a creative struggle of work and world, the nation establishes itself through war against another.

Importantly, these violent dialectics move us beyond specific aesthetic and political regimes to a much more pervasive economic influence. Marshall Berman characterizes the modern period by the insatiable activity of its market. "This system," he writes, "requires constant revolutionizing, disturbance, agitation; it needs to be perpetually pushed and pressed in order to maintain its elasticity and resilience, to appropriate and assimilate new energies, to drive itself to new heights of activity and growth." Modernity's progressive movements, he adds, cannot be theorized apart from "a ruling class with vested interests not merely in change but in crisis and chaos. 'Uninterrupted disturbance, everlasting uncertainty and agitation,' instead of subverting this society, actually serve to strengthen it."[8] Modernist aesthetics, particularly as they emerged out of rapidly industrializing nations such as Italy and Germany, offered a positive vision of this activity. Whether it be the hyperproductivity of avant-garde invention, the

ceaseless reckoning of part and whole in High Modernism, or even the interpretative dynamism of new criticism, the period as a whole is distinguished by its faith in the activity of production. By locating aesthetic value not in the art object, but in a constant aesthetic creationism, these avant-gardes reinforced the logic of commodification and the violence it demands. The avant-garde aesthetic, as it was diffused throughout the social order, offered ontological stability to a culture driven by market relations. Thus, as I argue in chapter 1, we need to reformulate Walter Benjamin's notion of "aesthetic politics" and its associations. "Aestheticization," as it occurred during this period, refers not to a false semblance of symbolic unity, but to a particular activity of semblance, a constant production and consumption of difference. Similarly, "totalitarianism" should not be defined simply as the incapacity to permit alterity, but must be seen as a rhetoric that privileges a certain kind of alterity as necessary to a socio-economic order already in place.

The history of the continental avant-garde, however, does not necessarily account for the London scene at this time, out of which emerged a radical critique of bourgeois culture and thus an alternative to modernity in general. Early twentieth-century London, as is well known, drew many expatriates into its vortex. The city was bubbling over with a violent energy – new ideas in the air, new politics on the streets, new machines in the factories. Many artists – from Conrad, Wilde, and James to later moderns such as Pound, H. D., and Eliot as well as avant-gardists like F. T. Marinetti, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, and Jacob Epstein – ventured into this cultural swelter, hoping to harness its progressive dynamism. However, immediately before and during World War I, the years which roughly frame this study, the energy of modern London began to grow stale. The hope of progress, the demand for newness – these urges, particularly in relation to the technological precisionism of modernity, seemed empty or, worse, treacherous. For British thinkers and artists, these years mark the beginning of a great disillusionment, an increasing suspicion that cultural modernity was somehow complicit with the horrors of economic modernity. From this point on, their work was forced to contend, in both style and content, with this insidious revelation.[9] Pound, for example, began to rage against the city's creative destruction; a cheap flood of commodities was eroding any hope of redemption. The age, he cried, demands only "an image / Of its accelerated grimace . . . a mould in plaster, / Made with no loss of time . . ." In the marketplace, "All things are flowing . . . But a tawdry cheapness / Shall outlast our days."[10] Eliot, similarly, foresaw that the violent production of modern life was congealing into habit. London was full

of "swarming life . . . Responsive to the momentary need," yet these vital impulses were easily managed by an efficient market, the "formal destiny" of a reified economy.[11]

In other words, London artists found themselves in the peculiar position of needing to be modern after the modern had already occurred. Their art, while seeking to draw upon the energy of the new world, faced its potential appropriation and dissolution within that world.[12] As perceived by this small circle of rebels, creativity may now exhibit an unprecedented state of freedom, but it has never experienced a greater homogenization. Vital expression has been given over to passive identification, and desire for freedom is subsumed by mere imitation. The average man and the aesthete grow indistinguishable; chaos and conformity work together to destroy social integrity. As Wyndham Lewis griped,

> Revolutionary politics, revolutionary art, and, oh, the revolutionary mind, is the dullest thing on earth. When we open a "revolutionary" review, or read a "revolutionary" speech, we yawn our heads off. It is true, there is nothing else. Everything is correctly, monotonously, dishearteningly "revolutionary." What a stupid world! What a stale fuss![13]

Lewis, not without a certain amount of paranoia, recognized that the most radical aesthetic efforts were not immune to the expanding market. The chaotic desires of society, no matter how violent or transgressive, were quickly contained and neutralized by the affective dimensions of advertising, fashion, and consumer demand. Much like the modern work of art, the commodity sold itself by "instantaneous suggestion" and "sensation"; it captures the man in the crowd by a "sequence of ephemerids, roughly organized into what he calls his 'personality.'"[14]

Needless to say, this paradoxical situation stymied the efforts of British artists to establish themselves. Painters and writers struggled to resist the rhetoric of expressive individualism as well as the emptiness of efficient mimesis; their work needed to be an alternative to both romanticism and formalism, to both the avant-garde and the marketplace.[15] For these artists, then, classicism served as the only viable response to democratic capitalism and its romantic affirmation. This aesthetic alternative emphasized the material tensions that define and delimit individuals, classes, and nations. It begins with the chaotic energy of the relative, the romantic spirit, but subject and object exist in a dynamic tension that restricts the tendency of either to spin out of control. Worldly forces restrain and refine each other, constructing an order that is stable and thus knowable, but also open to change and desire. In Hulme's famous formulation, "The classical poet never forgets this

finiteness, this limit of man. He remembers always that he is mixed up with earth. He may jump, but he always returns back; he never flies away into the circumambient gas."[16] The classical work of art, then, always bears the traces of its creation, the artistic struggle or agon, and thus regrounds idealism within its particular socio-historical context. The work, in fact, expresses as it reinforces these worldly tensions; its static presence serves to halt, clarify, and possibly redirect the violent production (and reproduction) of the modern world. In this, the classical work of art presents its radical alternative to the auraticized commodities and rigid mechanisms of the modern world. It serves to expose the human presence behind the alienated object or the reified relation, and thus to reopen the latter back into history. Ultimately, the work figures as both culmination and antithesis of its productive moment, as both a rigid monument and ultimate negation of modernity's terrifying order.

Most scholarship on classical modernism correctly foregrounds this art's static and dehumanized qualities. Classical works are characterized as fragments, traces, fossils, shells, and corpses. This scholarship, however, tends to interpret this propensity as simply reactionary, as a form of rigid libidinal binding that protects the subject from that which is considered other. Hal Foster, for example, argues that Lewis's work exemplifies a "protofascist desire to elevate self-alienation into an absolute value . . . as a form of ego armoring."[17] I would like to argue, however, that classical stasis is never necessarily chauvinistic, reactionary, or escapist, but more often than not serves an important critical function. The work's very promise of fulfillment is denied by its own coldness or inaccessibility; it thus both inspires and impedes the spectator's desire for identification or sublimation. British artists valued this intentional *halting* insofar as it could transform blind desire into conscious choice, as it could expose the treacherous identifications of modern culture and reground the subject within the world. As Peter Nicholls recognizes, this anti-vital aesthetic serves to drive "a wedge between art and life." He explains, "Once the habits of identification and assimilation are checked, the way is open to conceive the work as the production of aesthetic otherness which opens a gap or breach within the rhythmic flow of social life" (434, 433). As I hope to establish here, classical modernism is responsive to its own historical moment and its art affects an experience that is at once critical and constructive within that moment. At its best, this art serves not only to critique the signs and images that direct modern activity, but also to model and inspire alternative forms of identity and community.

Wyndham Lewis's *BLAST*[18] emerged out of the London scene at this time and the Vorticist movement, as it was closely aligned with British classicism, offers the most compelling account of these issues. Indeed, the only way to make sense of the journal is to consider it in its multiple contexts: a defensive aesthetic manifesto, a pre-war nationalist screed, and a bold economic critique. For Lewis, these three spheres – the aesthetic, the national, and the economic – rise and fall together; the terms of one condition and define the others. Thus, in the first section of the journal, a wild collection of blasts and blesses, he depicts London as a decadent city overrun by a rampant cult of the new and exotic. Lewis smugly lists the trends and fads that have weakened the minds of his contemporaries. France has infected them with "SLIPPERS, POODLE TEMPER, BAD MUSIC," while Spain has provided "GYPSY KINGS and ESPADAS"; England itself offers "BRITANNIC AESTHETE, WILD NATURE CRANK," and, of course, "DALY'S MUSICAL COMEDY GAIETY CHORUS GIRL" (*B*, 13, 19, 11). For Lewis, this ceaseless production and consumption of the modern is driven by a chronic romanticism. These various trends are united by a vulgar sentimentality of the self, a widespread faith in the freedom and vitality of the individual. Free trade in economics, liberalism in politics, protestantism in religion, vitalism in philosophy – each serves the rather uncritical notion, derived from Rousseau and the French Revolution, that "LIFE is the important thing!" (*B*, 129). Lewis further aligns this widespread fever with the growing demands of the market. Here, all that is seemingly free and revolutionary feeds a consumer-based economy; all that is excessive and violent serves a single, static order. This becomes apparent at the end of the journal's first section, when Lewis announces, with mixed disgust and awe, that England has been given over to a "violent boredom." "In England," he writes, "there is no vulgarity in revolt. Or, rather, there is no revolt, it is the normal state" (*B*, 42).

The most prophetic passages of *BLAST* outline this double bind. Lewis laments the impossibility of attaining true individuality in a cultural market that consistently appropriates all difference. Creativity, he claims, is immediately given over to mimetic technologies, by which it becomes common, vulgar, and useful. For Lewis, this tragedy is most painfully acute in the case of the artist, whose attitude is now aped by the average citizen. As he explains, "Vulgarity and the host of cheap artisans compete in earning with the true artist" and thereby destroy the possibility of his "creative genius" (*B*, 15). This loss of aesthetic individualism, however, also ensures the loss of social order. Without true visionaries and a ceaselessly renewed

stream of ideas and inventions, society as a whole begins to suffer. In fact, despite its productivity – its "VAST MACHINERY" – England has atrophied as a world power. The nation has been overrun by an "effeminate lout" who can only reproduce himself (*B*, 11). As Lewis suggests, then, the country is threatened by the very principles of free trade it uses to justify its dominance; imperial power is undermined by the guilty liberal ideology it uses to appropriate world resources. Ultimately, modern society, driven by the unchecked energies of the market, negates individualism as well as community, creating a world at once homogenous and anarchic.

Lewis holds tightly to this basic critique and strives to establish a viable alternative. As he recognizes that a greater assertion of individualism against the mass would only reproduce the terms of the whole, he reconceives the individual as he exists within and through the mass. In *BLAST* and elsewhere, Lewis's solution is to undermine the oppositional logic that defines modern identities and assert a constitutive, intersubjective unity. The individual exists only through a process of "egotistical hardening" in the tension that persists, and must be constantly renewed, between himself and his environment (*B*, 134). He is forged, Lewis argues, by shocks and blasts experienced on the urban streets; he is clarified and strengthened by an intense jostling within the mass (*B*, 32). Conversely, it is left to the individual to exert pressure upon and thereby shape the amorphous mass that surrounds him. Lewis privileges chemists, mechanics, and hairdressers in that they use their skills to order and define otherwise unruly material. The artist, too, is valued for his ability to curb "aimless and retrograde growth into CLEAN ARCHED SHAPES and ANGULAR PLOTS" (*B*, 25). His power is that of the machine or turbine, drawing and channeling the flow of energy that surrounds him. As Lewis explains, "The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but its Master" (*B*, 148). Later in the journal, Pound similarly proclaims that the artist's occupation is that of "DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing and reflecting" (*B*, 153).

For Lewis, these tensions and contingencies restrict the potential excesses of both the individual and his world. Intellectual solipsism is tempered by physical engagement, whereas a vulgar materialism is challenged by critical thought. This doubleness is clearly reflected in the vorticist aesthetic. For many, Lewis's movement represents a simple hybrid of cubism and futurism. The vortex is a symbol of that which is at once geometric and vitalistic, formal and fluid.[19] Lewis, however, does not necessarily unite these two modes; rather, he allows stasis and vitality to restrain and strengthen each other. In